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ABSTRACT

This brief report states that recent emphasis on minimum competency testing has been on using the test results to make better decisions for improving the instructional program and providing remediation. State and local school districts, using advisory committees and commissions, are in various stages of identifying instructional goals and objectives to be used for test item specification and item writing. These activities are followed by field testing and then full-scale testing. States are carefully considering the rights of minority and handicapped students in their testing programs. A chart shows those 17 states that have the high school graduation requirement in place, the type of test to be passed, whether it is state or locally developed, and the first graduating class to which it applies. In many states, there has been considerable discussion about requiring minimum competency tests for grade-to-grade promotion, but little real action has been taken. (PN)

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20. Student Minimum Competency Testing

The Issue

Since the mid-seventies, over 35 states have required local school districts to give minimum competency tests to students in elementary, junior high or senior high school. Highly concerned over the apparent decline in student achievement in basic skills, policy makers in these states have mandated that students be tested to determine eligibility for remediation, grade promotion or high school graduation.

Many educators have been opposed to, or at best skeptical, about minimum competency testing as a way to improve student achievement. They reason that a test alone will not teach a student to read and compute, and that only better teaching methods, improved curricula and materials, or remediation activities can accomplish this.

On the other hand, state policy makers supporting minimum competency testing believe the value of a high school diploma has declined and automatic grade promotions have resulted in high school graduates who lack the basic skills. They conclude that minimum competenc' tests will assure that high school graduates will have at least minimum basic skills and that public education will therefore be more accountable for its actions.

State Action

The movement by states toward minimum competency testing, rapid in the mid- and late-seventies, has slowed considerably. Thirty-nine states had taken action by 1982.

- From 1975 through 1977, the emphasis was on testing students to determine whether they would receive high school diplomas.

- The peak years for legislative and state board of education mandates were 1977 and 1978, when 25 states adopted the testing.

- Only two states have moved to require minimum competency testing since 1978.

- In 1978 and 1979, only two states tied high school graduation to passage of minimum competency tests.

The emphasis in the last few years has been on creating an early-warning testing program that would report on students' progress as they left elementary, junior high or senior high schools. Results can then be used to make better decisions for improving the instructional program and providing remediation.

The high school graduation test requirement is being deemphasized or delayed.

- In a few instances, high school diplomas have been denied to students who have failed a state minimum competency test. North Carolina has done this since 1980.

- Florida had intended to impose the requirement earlier but has been challenged in the courts, and after four years, an appeal is still pending in the case of Debra P. v. Turlington. (Regardless of the outcome of the court decision, both Florida and North Carolina have gone through more than one test cycle and state officials report that increasingly large numbers of students are passing these tests.)

- In Kentucky, where an earlier state board ruling called for a graduation test, the legislature passed a law specifically excluding it from the requirements for a diploma.

- In Utah, a 1980 graduation test deadline was extended for some local school districts.

- In Connecticut, an early-exit test mandate for high school students was stopped because the necessary funds were not appropriated.

- The Maine Legislature originally had included the test as a high school graduation requirement, but after reviewing early test scores and other survey data, they refused to continue the program.

- In New Jersey, a commissioner of education was appointed by a new governor who campaigned on a promise to reduce state control over education. Minimum competency testing has been eliminated at three grade levels, but the high school graduation test has been retained.

Generally, state activity now centers on putting the mandates into practice. State and local school districts, using advisory committees and commissions, are in various stages of identifying instructional goals and objectives to be used for test-item specification and item writing. These activities are followed by field testing and then full-scale testing. This year, most states have their testing programs well under way. They are trying to develop realistic schedules. They are carefully considering the rights of minority and handicapped students in their testing programs. For handicapped children, most states are using Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to decide whether specific handicapped students should be included in the testing program. Florida has been working on an equivalent test for learning-disabled students.

Despite the delays in implementing minimum competency tests, 17 states now require students to take them as a graduation requirement. The following chart shows those states that have the high school graduation requirement in place, the type of test to be passed, whether it is state or locally developed, and the first graduating class to which it applies.

STATE	TYPE OF TEST	CLASS
Alabama	State test	1984
Arizona	Local test	1976
California	Local test	1980
Delaware	State test	1981
Florida	State test	1979 (moved by court to 1983)
Idaho	State test	1982 (local option)
Louisiana	State test	1990?
Maryland	State test	1982
Nevada	Local test	1982
New Mexico	Local test	1981 (Proficiency endorsement)
New York	State test	1983?
North Carolina	State test	1980
Oregon	Local test	1978
South Carolina	State test	1992?
Tennessee	State test	1982
Utah	Local test	1980
Vermont	Local test	1981
Virginia	State test	1981

In many states, there has been considerable discussion about requiring minimum competency tests for grade-to-grade promotion, but little real action has been taken. A handful of states have asked local districts to write promotion and retention plans that incorporate a minimum competency test, but only Louisiana has definitely tied grade-to-grade promotion to its test; the mandate is now in its third year.

Programs Are Developing Slowly

Putting competency programs into place has taken more time than was anticipated. In the mid-seventies, the laws required tests to be developed in one year. Today, most states know that the process takes two or three years.

Writing test item specifications for a minimum competency test usually involves a statewide committee and a debate of what minimums should be and what basic skills should be taught at different grade levels.

Most often, reading, writing and mathematics are the focus for the tests. But a number of state mandates call for minimum competency in such subject areas as spelling, government or history, career training, "life" or "survival" skills and consumer economics.

The testing of writing appears to be most troublesome. Most educators and policy makers agree that an open writing sample is the ideal way to approach writing improvement, but

statewide scoring of open writing samples is expensive and time-consuming.

Drawing up test item specifications, preparing sample tests and field testing have taken considerable time. Many states have contracted with commercial test companies to assist with the process; however, in a number of states, department of education personnel are writing the tests with the help of local school advisory groups.

The Results

Two newspaper reporters, after visiting schools across the states in 1979, summed up their impression of minimum competency testing:

> "The full impact upon education is still clouded in uncertainty. One of the major questions is whether an emphasis on basic skills and competency testing will provide improved education for marginal and below-average students without limiting the variety and depth of instruction for higher achieving students. So far, neither the worst fears of minimum competency testing critics, nor the highest hopes of testing supporters have become reality."

A recent report by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) charged that the preoccupation of educators and state legislators with ". . . minimum competency testing has contributed to the decline in the teaching and learning of critical written and analytic skills." A study by NCTE's committee on testing and evaluation found that in general test scores told teachers very little about the accomplishments and abilities of students that were not observable in classrooms. Moreover, the committee confirmed some of the worst fears of critics by concluding that the tests, originally intended to measure the effectiveness of curriculums, are now a driving force in deciding what should be taught. The committee's report suggested that the focus on basic skills may result in limiting students' career choices. Students, they say, are not learning the more advanced skills they will need to compete successfully for more demanding jobs. The committee recommended that the tests be modified to diagnose students' educational needs and suggest teaching strategies that will effectively meet them.

What to Read from ECS

The following papers are available from the ECS Distribution Center:

Anderson, Barry D., The Costs of Legislated Minimal Competency Requirements. $2.75

Wise, Arthur E., A Critique of Minimal Competency Testing. $2.75

Footnotes, "Competency Testing: Emerging Principles." No. 9, Jan. 1982. $2.50

Trachtenberg, Paul L., The Legal Implications of Statewide Pupil Performance Standards. $2.75

Green, Thomas F., Minimal Educational Standards: A Systematic Perspective. $2.75

Minimum Competency Testing: A Report of Four Regional Conferences. Jan. 1978. $1.50

Let's Talk About Minimum Competency Testing (a discussion guide). Feb. 1978. $5.00

Pipho, Chris, State Activity, Minimal Competency Testing (updated Nov. 13, 1981).

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